4-1-2012

Echoes of the South: Exploring Southern Dialect

Karen Arneson
College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol10/iss1/10

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In or about 1920, my twenty-something Grandma Jessie packed her trunk and left her home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Armed with a secretarial degree, she left the shadows of the Appalachian Mountains for the promise of a better life in Chicago, Illinois. The better life never really materialized, but a good-looking man did, so Grandma stayed. So citified did she become that it surprised me when I first heard about her country roots. Soft-spoken, yet without the tell-tale Southern-drawl, I assumed Grandma was as much a Northerner as my Chicago-born mother, her daughter.

With this new revelation, I pondered what Grandma must have thought when not one but two of her daughters’ heads were turned by country boys. My Tennessean daddy won over Mama in a three-week, whirlwind courtship that included the high compliment that she was “‗purd-y-er’ than a speckled pup under a red wagon wheel.” That particular piece of homespun history sent my sisters and me into fits of wrinkled noses and “EEE-ewes” as we pictured a poor puppy run over by a farm wagon.

In the years to follow, what once charmed our mother became cause for contempt when she heard the impact on her children’s speech. In our mother’s mind, the Southern dialect made one sound uneducated, and she would have none of her children talking “like hillbillies;” yes, “like hillbillies” not “as hillbillies.” It seemed that every return home from visiting the farm of my father’s childhood was accompanied by angry demands to “Say it right!”

Allan Metcalf addresses this prejudice in his book, how we talk: American Regional English Today: “In both North and South, the old stereotypes about Southern speech persist, strongly influencing our ideas about the land and people: that Southern speech is kinder, gentler, more intimate than the speech of the North, though also less educated and sophisticated” (4).

About the time Grandma Jessie headed north and began losing her “kinder, gentler, more intimate speech,” a northern Ohio professor began studies that made his dialect the standard. Standard American English came about in the mid-twentieth century when Professor John Samuel Kenyon studied the phonetics of American English and published two books. His first work, American Pronunciation, published in 1924, provided the benchmark for dictionary editors as well as public speakers such as actors and broadcasters. Later, in 1944, he published Pronouncing Dictionary of American English written with Thomas A. Knott. This work was last revised in 1953, but it remains the authority on American pronunciation (Metcalf 56). His books made his Northern dialect the model of speech for the whole country. Prior to his work, the speech of eastern New England was considered the more educated pattern because it was the speech closest to that of England, the mother country (57).

Which raises the question: Why do we have so many different dialects, when the English language came to America through one place, England? The answer is twofold: 1) British English has even more variety than American English, so the language brought to America wasn’t all the same dialect, 2) Language is naturally fluid and not handed down from generation-to-generation unchanged. Add two centuries of independence and American English has distinguished itself from its roots. In fact, it has become so distinct that when a book is published in both countries, it has to be edited for special vocabulary differences. An American flashlight becomes an English torch, and
Americans rise to higher floors carried in an elevator, while the British are lifted higher by means of a lift (Metcalf vii).

As already stated, language does not pass unchanged from parents to children down through the generations. In 1607, when those first settlers arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, they came from various places with their various English dialects. While the adults retained their original British dialects, their children assimilated into their language the dialects of their peers. It was too early to say Jamestown children grew up to have Southern accents, but by the end of the first century, the language of the South had developed its own sound.

Today, the Southern dialect is considered the most distinctive of the American dialects and seems to garner the most interest. A 1989 bibliography records 3,833 studies of Southern dialect, and the incomplete Dictionary of American Regional English, published in 2000, contained 2100 words attributed to the South as compared to only 700 Northern words (Metcalf 5). It seems that however maligned the Southern dialect, it is a prolific tongue spoken by many people in many states. To be clear, there is not one Southern dialect, but many rich varieties dependent on location and the history of population migration, yet gathered together under the broad term “Southern dialect.”

Robert McNeil and William Cran, co-authors of Do You Speak American, wrote: “For many generations, Northerners have looked down their noses at Southern speech, but today many would be surprised to learn that the South has become the largest dialect area in the United States. More Americans now “speak Southern” than speak any other regional dialect (67).

The sounds of the South can be easily differentiated from the North in just a few syllable choices. While Northerners refer to themselves with two syllables, Ah-ee; their Southern counterparts sigh, Ah. But when speaking words beginning with “n,” “d,” or “t” followed by a “long u,” Southern speech generously adds a “y” turning news into nyews and Tuesdays into Tyuesdays. Then there is the substitution of the “short i” for a “short e” when followed by an “n.” A quantity of ten becomes a drawled tin. Likewise, the writing instrument the North calls a pen becomes a pin, men are min, and to be tender is to be tender. One might wonder how Southern min know when they are asked for a pen rather than a pin. Southern belles escape injury to their tender fingers by clearly marking their preference with the addition of “ink” to pins as in “May Ah please have the ink pin?”

More than just phonetic differences, the South also has distinctive grammar variations. Many of the differences involve verbs phrases; for instance, the attachment of the prefix a- with –ing participles as in Daddy went a-fishin’. Dropping the phonetic “g” in –ing verbs is also commonly heard in the South. Typical of all grammar, there are restrictions in use. Walt Wolfram notes these in his study of dialectic grammar:

\[A\text{-prefixing does not generally occur when the following syllable is unstressed, as in } ^{\text{*}}a\text{-discoverin’ or } ^{\text{*}}a\text{-repeatin’}; \text{this prohibition is no doubt a reflection of the prosodic restriction against words beginning with two unstressed syllables.} \]
\[\text{Furthermore, } a\text{-prefixing is favored in preconsonantal contexts (e.g. She was a-drinkin’) over prevocatlic ones (e.g. She was a-eatin’) though it is permissible in both types of contexts. (81)} \]

Another Southern turn of phrase involves prefacing past tense verbs with the word done as in Mama done finished the wash. In this case, done functions as a perfect indicating an action recently completed. When referring to a planned event or an action to occur in the immediate future, a Southern farmer would say he was fixin’ to as in I’m fixin’ to milk the cows. If the bull got loose and surprised the farmer, he might later tell his wife that he was so scared he liketa died. This specialized auxiliary verb serves to intensify the significance of the context – not literally, but metaphorically. Liketa would not be used in a factual sense as in I liketa paint the barn, but there weren’t any red
Although the farmer wouldn’t use *liketa* in the previous sentence, he would use *weren’t* demonstrating the use of the be-verb to mark negativity rather than plurality (Wolfram 84).

Perhaps the most characteristically Southern grammar variation is *y’all*. This is not a mere contraction of the words “you” and “all,” but came about when “thou” was dropped from the language. “You” meant more than one when “thou” meant only one. With the loss of “thou,” “you” became singular, and a way to refer to more than one was needed. The Southern solution was *y’all*. As already mentioned, *y’all* is not a contraction, as evidenced by the possessive form, *y’all’s*, as in *How are y’all’s children?* Metcalf elaborates on the correct usage of *y’all*:

*Y’all* is the best known and most prevalent of Southernisms. You can hardly live in the South without adopting it, unless you choose to sound like a Yankee. But unless you’re a Southerner, you may overuse it. To an outsider, it may seem that Southerners simply use *y’all* as a substitute for you, both singular and plural. That notion gets some Southerners hot under the collar. They reserve *y’all* for more than one, saying *you* when they mean just one person…When one Southerner asks another, “How are y’all?” it is an inquiry about the well-being not just of the person spoken to, but also of that person’s family.…” (15)

In early June, my sister and I visited our Southern relatives in our dad’s hometown, Bradford, Tennessee. I’d hardly stepped out of the rental car onto the red soil of the place, when my tongue loosened, my jaw slackened, and I drawled, “Aunt (pronounced “ain’t”) Rachel, if you ain’t a sight for sore eyes, I don’t know what is.” To which she responded, “How are y’all?” She was, of course, not only asking about my sister’s and my welfare, but also the well-being of our families.

Linguists have a term for that shift from my Northern dialect into my relative’s Southern drawl: code-switching. Sue Ellen Christian discusses the meaning behind code-switching in her article, “Defining Identity: In changing how we speak, we put the accent on connecting.” Christian defines code-switching as “changing the way we speak – the word choice, accent, syntax – depending on our audience.” People do it all the time and for various reasons. There are those who drop their distinctive speech in order to sound more educated in business or public settings. Others may pick up the dialects of their personal cultures when revisiting childhood places or people from those places.

In the best cases, code-switching is used to connect to others. It can be a way to facilitate communication. In the worst case, it can be used to push into another’s personal space and create annoyance. The key seems to be shared identity. Christian states: “Code…switching work[s] best when the speaker and the audience share an identity – be it cultural, ethnic or something else.” However, she warns, “When there isn’t a shared identity, what is ideally a technique to communicate more effectively instead produces the opposite effect.”

For me, code-switching seems to be a response – echoes of my childhood – rather than a choice I make. Perhaps it is because the sounds of my childhood were neither purely Northern nor Southern. While playmates called their mothers *Mommy*, I knew mine as *Mama*. In our home, we ate *breakfast, dinner, and supper*. When I entered school, my mother packed my *dinner* in a brown paper *sack*, but in an effort to conform to the language of my peers, I switched *dinner* to *lunch* and *sack* became *bag*. However, on the playground, I just hated it when I hit my *funny bone* though classmates did not see anything funny about hitting a *crazy bone*.

Then, there was Daddy. At the end of the day, he’d walk through the front door whistling a country tune, greet my sisters and me with “*Howdy! Howdy! Howdy!*” and continue to the kitchen to see what was for *supper*. Later, seated near the window at the table, if a breeze blew too cold, Daddy would close the *winder*, but if something caught his eye outside that *winder*, he might tell us to “*take a-look yonder.*”
Mama did her best to teach her daughters to not “talk like hillbillies,” but it was as much a losing battle as the one my Confederate relatives fought back in the early 1860s. Now, all it takes is a trip down South, and this daughter hears Southern phrases a-slippin’ between her lips with the ease of molasses a-slidin’ over hot corncakes. (Sorry Mama, it’s in our blood.)

Works Cited